



Scoping Report for the Delta River Management Plan Environmental Assessment December 2008



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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for the stewardship of our public lands, and is committed to manage, protect and improve these lands in a manner that best serves the needs of the American people. Management is based upon the principles of multiple use and sustained yield of our nation's resources within a framework of environmental responsibility and scientific technology. Management direction is provided through the development of land use plans, which are used to determine appropriate uses and allocate resources, develop strategies to manage and protect resources, and to establish systems to monitor and evaluate the status of resources and the effectiveness of management practices over time. The BLM is preparing a plan that will update and ultimately replace the existing 1983 Delta River Management Plan. This plan will provide a comprehensive framework for managing and allocating current and future uses of the public lands and resources within the Delta National Wild and Scenic River corridor.

Public scoping is a requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1501.7) and BLM planning regulations (43 CFR 1610.2 and 43 CFR 1610.41). Scoping is the term used to define the early and open process for determining the extent, or "scope," of issues to be addressed in the planning process. The purpose of "scoping" is to identify issues important to the future management of public lands and resources within a planning area. Identifying issues helps to guide the development of management alternatives that are evaluated in an Environmental Assessment (EA), ultimately leading to decisions that will form the basis for the new Delta River Management Plan. The scoping process also provides an opportunity to educate the public about the management of public lands, and for the BLM to measure the concerns of those who have an interest in the resources and resource uses of the planning area.

This report documents the public scoping process for the Delta River Management Plan. It includes a description of the scoping process and activities, a summary of the comments submitted by the public, an overview of the issues identified after a thorough review of the scoping comments, and an overview of the planning schedule.

B. Background

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of December 2, 1980, (ANILCA, P.L. 96-487, Sec. 603(49)), established the upper stretch of the Delta River and all of the Tangle Lakes and the Tangle River as a component of the National Wild and Scenic River system to be administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the BLM. ANILCA Sec. 605 (d) also directed the Secretary of the Interior to establish detailed boundaries, prepare a management and development plan, and present this information to Congress by December 2, 1983. In response to these directives, the BLM developed the 1983 Delta River

Management Plan, which established detailed boundaries and developed general management policies for the Delta National Wild and Scenic River corridor.

Since 1983, the BLM has managed the river corridor consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, ANILCA, and the 1983 Delta River Management Plan. Management efforts have focused on monitoring use levels and campsite impacts within the river corridor and developing strategies to mitigate these impacts. River registration boards at the boat launches, random river user surveys, and river corridor overflights have been used to document visitation levels and user trends. The BLM river crew floats the river at least three times per year, picking up litter, burying or disposing of human waste, inventorying and monitoring campsite impacts, and making public contacts to disseminate information regarding low impact camping information and rules and regulations. In 2006, the Delta National Wild and Scenic River Wayside was reconstructed to accommodate increased day use from Denali Highway travelers passing through the river corridor. These renovations included the development of new parking facilities, interpretive walkways and information panels, and reconstruction of the existing boat launch. In 2009, a renovation of the Tangle Lakes Campground is scheduled that will seek to address needed changes and upgrades to facilities, and to reduce resource impacts to vegetation that has been caused by the unmanaged proliferation of campsites and roadways within the campground. Designated campsites, roadways, and parking facilities will be developed and interpretive walkways and panels will be updated and installed throughout the campground. Areas with impacted vegetation will also be rehabilitated to help protect this fragile resource.

To prepare for the revision of the river management plan, the Glennallen Field Office contracted a private consulting firm (*Confluence Research and Consulting, Anchorage, AK*) to prepare and administer the Delta River Recreation User Survey during the summer of 2005. Objectives of the survey were to characterize river users, identify impacts that they experienced in the river corridor, identify users' tolerances for those impacts, and describe users' acceptance of possible management strategies to address these impacts. An analysis of the survey results provided useful information for the development of issues and planning criteria for the public scoping process.

The Glennallen Field Office also conducted a series of focus group meetings in the spring of 2007 during the Benefits Based Planning process. The purpose of these meetings was to solicit comments from stakeholders who use the Delta River corridor. Discussion at these meetings focused on how people used the area, their primary purpose for using the area, their opinions on desired future conditions for the area, and their opinions on management options. Stakeholders included representatives from local subsistence and hunting groups, motorized access groups, environmental and conservation groups, Native tribes and corporations, and other state and federal agencies. Information from the surveys and focus group meetings will be incorporated into the Delta River Management Plan EA.

C. Purpose and Need

On September 7, 2007, the Record of Decision was signed for the East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP). The EARMP is a comprehensive land use plan that guides

management activities on all BLM managed lands within the Glennallen Field Office boundaries. After the completion of the EARMP in 2007, it was clear that the 1983 Delta River Management Plan needed to be updated to reflect recent decisions that were made in the EARMP, and to address current and future issues that had developed in the river corridor since the completion of the 1983 Delta River Management Plan. The EARMP made decisions and developed management objectives for resource values that were identified within the Delta National Wild and Scenic River (DNWSR) corridor, but directed that specific recreation-related decisions would be made in a separate implementation plan. Other resource values and management objectives for the planning area were defined in the EARMP, and as such are not included in the scope of this planning effort.

The updated Delta River Management Plan will contain three parts: (1) a revision of the 1983 Delta National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan (NWSR Plan), (2) a Delta River Special Recreation Management Area Plan (SRMA Plan), and (3) an associated Land Use Plan (LUP) Amendment to the East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP). An Environmental Assessment (EA) will be prepared in association with the Delta River Management Plan. The EA will propose various alternative management strategies and will assess the effects of each management alternative on the resources within the planning area.

The 1983 Delta River Management Plan identified management objectives and recognized that the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, section 1(b), requires that a national wild and scenic river corridor be administered to protect and enhance certain “outstandingly remarkable values,” which were the basis for the original designation. However, the 1983 Delta River Management Plan did not clearly identify and define the outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs). The updated NWSR plan will clearly define the ORVs, and a management strategy will be developed which seeks to enhance and protect the ORVs. A management strategy with objectives that are based upon the enhancement and protection of the ORVs is necessary to ensure that current and future activities and uses within the river corridor are compatible with, and do not negatively affect, the identified ORVs within the river corridor.

The EARMP designated the DNWSR corridor as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). This SRMA designation requires the completion of an implementation plan that describes specific recreation management actions within the planning area. As part of developing the SRMA plan, the EARMP must be amended for recreation management allocation decisions that were never made in the EARMP, as required by BLM policy (BLM Handbook H-1601-1, Land Use Planning Handbook). These recreation allocation decisions were not made during the EARMP planning process because the new planning guidelines were still in development before the completion of the EARMP. Therefore, the EARMP must be amended to make these recreation allocation decisions for the SRMA component of the Delta River Management Plan.

The new decisions that will be made as part of the Delta River Management Plan will be analyzed in the EA. These decisions will only apply to recreation management and only for the BLM-managed lands within the DNWSR corridor and Delta River SRMA; as these two designations share the exact same boundary. Decisions that have already been made in the

EARMP for other resources within the planning area will not be changed, and these decisions will be included in the updated Delta NWSR plan.

D. Description of the Scoping Process

A Notice of Intent was published in the Federal Register on April 10, 2008. This marked the beginning of the scoping process for the planning effort. Scoping is an early and open process to gather input on the environmental issues, potential impacts, and management alternatives to be addressed in the EA. Scoping occurs within the BLM and with the general public and other stakeholders such as State or Federal agencies or Tribal governments.

Scoping comments were formally accepted for 60 days, beginning July 15, 2008 and ending on September 15, 2008. A letter was sent to all interested parties on a BLM mailing list that was comprised of general public individuals, local and national organizations, tribes, villages, and native corporations, and state and federal agencies who had expressed interest in the Delta River planning process or BLM Alaska planning efforts. This mailing list was compiled from a variety of sources, including the EARMP mailing list, BLM Alaska planning contacts, the 2005 Delta River Recreation User Survey mailing list, and participants and stakeholders in the Delta River Benefits Based Planning meetings held in February 2007. This mailing list totaled more than 1100 addresses. In addition, the cover letter and scoping bulletin was sent to more than 280 email address contacts and was posted on the BLM website. The scoping bulletin described the planning process, the issues and objectives, and asked the public for their input and opinions about planning issues and management strategies. It contained information about how to submit comments and get more information about the planning process and issues.

The scoping process was also publicized through local venues including the Copper River Record, Delta Wind, and the statewide “What’s Up” list serve. Public service announcements aired over KCHU, KDHS and KCAM. A mailing list has been continually updated throughout the planning process with names of those who have requested to be included on the mailing list.

As part of scoping, the BLM identified preliminary planning criteria to be used throughout the planning process. Planning criteria establish the decision scope in regards to the types of decisions to be made throughout this planning effort. These criteria were published in the Federal Register Notice of Intent. The public was asked to provide comments on the planning criteria and issues concerning resources and resource uses to be addressed in this planning effort.

F. Other Agencies and Organizations

The BLM has met with other agencies to discuss planning issues, answer questions related to the EA process, and to give updates on the planning progress. The BLM has consulted with the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources (AKDNR) regarding the ownership of State lands within

the management area and how this authority relates to the overall planning process. A briefing for the State of Alaska DNR and ADF&G staff was held in February, 2008. The purpose of the briefing was to inform key State personnel about the project, the planning process, preliminary issues, and discuss the best way to coordinate during the planning process. The cover letter and scoping bulletin was also provided to more than 80 other agencies and organizations to explain the planning process and invite participation.

G. Consultation with Tribes

The BLM has consulted with local Native villages, tribes, and organizations to brief them on the planning process and ask for their participation. The BLM recognizes the importance of the involvement of local villages and Native land owners in the planning process for the purposes of preserving cultural resources and the local knowledge of the area. Letters were sent to the following tribes, villages, and Native organizations:

Ahtna Heritage Foundation	Gulkana Village Council
Ahtna, Incorporated	Mentasta Traditional Consortium
Alaska Federation of Natives	Mentasta Traditional Council
Bureau of Indian Affairs	Mount Sanford Tribal Consortium
Cheesh-na Tribal Council	Native Village of Cantwell
Chickaloon Village Traditional Council	Native Village of Eyak
Chitina Native Corporation	Native Village of Kluti-Kaah
Chitina Traditional Indian Village Council	Pedro Bay Village Council
Chugach Alaska Corporation	Tazlina Village Council
Copper River Native Association	Yakutat Tlingit Tribe
Gakona Village Council	

II. COMMENT AND ISSUE SUMMARY

Throughout the public scoping period, twenty comments were received related to the Delta River Management Plan. Comments were analyzed in detail and resulted in the identification of planning issues that will be addressed during the development of alternatives. An issue is defined as a matter of controversy or dispute over resource management activities or land use that is well defined and/or topically discrete, and entails alternatives between which to decide. Usually, the causal relationship between the activity or use and undesirable results are well defined or can be documented, and the level of controversy is high enough to merit further analysis. Statement of planning issues orients the planning process so that interdisciplinary thought, analysis, and documentation is directed toward resolving the planning issues during preparation of the EA. Issues that have been identified for this planning process, and a summary of the comments for each issue, have been provided for review in the following section.

In addition to the planning issues, concerns related to the planning process were also raised. These are discussed under Section 2.C. These will be addressed during the planning process, but will not assist in development of alternatives.

A. Summary of Public Comments by Issue (in alphabetical order)

1. Access/Rights-of-Way (ROW)

Access comments were primarily related to rights-of-way for overland mining access across the river corridor. The BLM received five comments related to rights-of-way for mining access to mining claims that are located adjacent to the river corridor. Overall, there was a general consensus that overland access to mining claims adjacent to the river corridor was necessary to access these mining claims, but some of the commenters stated that the BLM needed to protect the relatively narrow river corridor from noise, visual impacts, and resource damages that could be caused by overland access across the river corridor. One comment suggested that, if necessary, a road crossing the river corridor should be constructed at right angles to the river corridor, for the shortest possible distance. It was also suggested that a quick crossing of the river corridor may be in the overall best interest of the area rather than a lengthy road running parallel to the river corridor.

The State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) requested that the BLM recognize the need for the development of utility corridors and transportation corridors to support economic growth in the area. One of the comments suggested the possible need for a bridge crossing the river corridor if current exploration efforts are successful on the west side of the river corridor, and that ANILCA contemplated such access provisions within conservation system units. Another comment suggested that the plan must include effective transportation provisions for mining access and that broad latitude must be included to allow the development of new transportation infrastructure in the most feasible ways possible. The commenter stated that the need exists to establish a straight-forward, predictable process to develop future infrastructure needs for mineral and energy resources.

2. Aircraft Use

Numerous comments were received regarding aircraft use within the planning area. Many of these comments were concerned with low-level overflights within the river corridor and increased helicopter activities associated with mining activities located adjacent to the planning area. It was generally recognized in these comments that helicopter overflights negatively affect the wilderness experience that many are seeking in the area. Two comments specifically recommended a voluntary no-fly zone above the river corridor. One comment stated, "Aircraft overflights, especially commercial ones for purposes like flight-seeing or resource extraction can create serious adverse impacts for both passive and active recreationists (as well as home and cabin owners) on the lands or waters below, and for some wildlife. BLM should do everything possible to prevent this situation from developing and adversely affecting the experience along the Wild and Scenic River. For overflights with no landings on federal lands, and therefore presumably no permit requirement, BLM should seek assistance from the FAA, and if that fails, should seek voluntary compliance with guidelines designating a zone of airspace above and adjacent to the river corridor within which flying should not occur except for reasons of safety when weather conditions are adverse. Where a permit is required for landing, a condition of that permit should be that flying is prohibited within the designated zone except for safety reasons."

Two commenters said that aircraft landings should be prohibited on both the water and land surfaces of the “Wild” segment of the river corridor. These commenters also stated that aircraft landings should only be permitted on Round Tangle Lake, “which is adjacent to the developed campground and where a somewhat greater level of noise would be expected.” They suggested that if landings are allowed to continue on Round Tangle or on other lakes in the planning area, the level of use should be monitored, and that use levels should not be allowed to increase significantly from the current level.

One comment expressed the need for the plan to address potential future airstrip construction within the planning area. They stated, “Where applicable, we request the plan address potential airport expansion for both economic development and for runway expansion as population centers continue to grow and air travel needs of rural communities continue to expand, as well as access roads to such existing and future facilities. Of particular importance in this rural planning area are transportation corridors for resource development and rural airports.”

3. Climate Change

One comment asked that the EA incorporate alternatives and a strategy for proactively addressing and responding to the effects of climate change and global warming. The comment recommended the following points of discussion be incorporated into the EA: “Provide training on climate change and variability for all resource managers; consider climate change and variability as a component of long-range management plans and strategies, as well as prioritizing adaptive management; implement monitoring and assessment programs for impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitats; educate the public about climate change and its effects on Alaska; establish and maintain migration corridors that allow species movement and vegetation shifts among islands of suitable habitat; increase buffer zones around identified critical habitat in order to increase options for species under various climate change scenarios; protect riparian and wetland communities to promote resilience of these important and susceptible habitats; and make the reduction and elimination of human-induced synergistic impacts a top priority for land and resource management.”

4. Commercial Activities

One comment was received regarding commercial uses within the planning area. The commenter suggested commercial berry picking should not be allowed in the corridor because berries are an important subsistence resource and an important recreational activity. The commenter also suggested limiting competitive events in the classified “Wild” segment of the river corridor, as well as overall use limits on commercial activities.

5. Facility Development

Numerous comments were received regarding facility development in the planning area. All comments were in general agreement that future facility development in the area should remain minimal, be discrete and blend with the natural surroundings, and should only be necessary to protect resources from visitor impacts. The comments also expressed concerns that additional facility development would encourage more public and tourist pressure within

the area. One respondent said that the river portage should remain rustic. They said, “I like the portage the way it is and wouldn’t want to see it made with nice steps or too easy like the Gulkana.” Another commentor stated, “The campground is probably the best in the state because of its rustic nature where you actually feel like you are in the back country as opposed to putting up a tent on a gravel pad next to a paved road. Please do not change that!”

One comment was received that supported the development of a visitor center. The respondent said, “We believe that BLM should take aggressive action to try to acquire the lodge and adjacent lots that are for sale just down the road from the campground. Not only would BLM ownership prevent further private development and its impacts in an area with such incredibly high public values, but the site would make an excellent location for a BLM/State of Alaska visitor center that could both dispense practical information about the area and interpret its natural and cultural history.” Those that opposed the development of a visitor center said this would increase overall use within the area and that this would detrimentally affect the experience that currently exists. A commenter stated, “The literature also describes the potential of BLM operating a visitor’s center and disseminating marketing materials. These are interesting aspects as both of these mechanisms are typically used to increase the use of an area, which would in turn increase the impact on the environment. So in essence, BLM is escalating the issue as they are the ones who are trying to increase the overall usage of an area that still maintains limited use. Additionally, they are creating limited access for a preferred few.”

6. Fish and Wildlife

A few comments were received that expressed wildlife concerns. One comment stated the “...most important resources and values in the area that need careful monitoring and protection are fish and wildlife and their habitat...” and another, more generalized comment was, “there is a gross imbalance on the public lands that both unwisely and inequitably favors motorized recreation over muscle-powered recreation. In the interests of both good stewardship and fundamental fairness, this imbalance needs to be rectified—thereby also helping to protect clean air and water, fish and wildlife...” Two comments said the use of hovercraft, airboats, and jet skis had the potential to destroy fish and wildlife habitat, thereby negatively affecting fish and wildlife that depend on this habitat. There was also a concern that climate change could have a detrimental effect on fish and wildlife habitats. One comment expressed concerns related to the development of a mining road across the river corridor and potential effects to fish and wildlife.

7. Historic and Archaeological Resources

There were few comments regarding cultural resources in the planning area. Generally, these comments suggested cultural resources should be protected from harm under applicable state and federal law. One comment suggested the BLM enter into a cooperative agreement with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

8. Natural Quiet and Natural Sounds

Two comments were received that mentioned the importance of the natural soundscape. There was concern over potential noise impacts from existing motorized uses and artificial noise sources that occur within the planning area. They expressed a need for baseline soundscape data and feel a soundscape inventory should be conducted for the management area as a part of this planning process. They felt that the EA should consider the natural soundscape as a critical resource to the area and protect it as such.

9. Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORV)

One comment was received regarding the ORVs within the planning area. The commenter said, "...when formally identifying the Outstanding Remarkable Values for the Delta River during this planning process, we request the legislative history of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act guide the decision-making process. It is our understanding the legislative history identified scenic, cultural, and recreational values for the Delta River. While the river corridor certainly has other resources and attributes, we agree these stand out as values that qualify as "outstandingly remarkable"."

10. Property Acquisition

Comments differed on the opportunity of BLM acquiring private parcels available for sale within the planning area. One commenter said, "It's hard to believe that BLM did not step in and purchase the property occupied by the Tangle Lakes Lodge. The danger of this turning into the incredible eyesore at Summit Lake is frightening and certainly would subtract from the Wild and Scenic concept in a big way." Another commenter said the BLM should have taken aggressive action "...to try to acquire the lodge and adjacent lots that are for sale just down the road from the campground..." Those that oppose the BLM acquiring additional property within the planning area were generally concerned that there was little opportunity for private ownership remaining and that these opportunities should be left to the general public. One comment stated, "There is so little private property available there that it would be a shame to have any of it come under government ownership."

11. Recreation and Visitor Services

Numerous comments relating to recreation were received during scoping. Some were very specific such as campsite and fire ring management within the river corridor, limitations on group size and camping equipment, human waste management, marketing to the general public, enforcement of rules and regulations, and river monitoring patrol frequency. Other comments were more general in nature. Generally, people seemed to be fairly happy with the current recreation management in the planning area. Some commenters disagreed with the BLM's perception that visitor use had increased throughout the planning area since the 1983 Delta River Management Plan was completed, while others stated that they had noticed an increase in visitor use throughout the planning area. All comments regarding marketing of the area were in agreement that additional marketing was not needed, and that it would actually diminish the existing recreational experience by increasing the number of visitors to the area. There was a general consensus among commenters that improper disposal of human waste and cutting of green trees within the corridor was unacceptable, but some

commenters were opposed to the BLM implementing requirements regarding human waste disposal. Some comments recommended increasing signage at trailheads with rules and regulations, maps, and interpretive information.

12. Scenic Qualities

Commenters that mentioned the scenic qualities of the landscapes in the planning area all stated the need to protect the current condition of this resource. One commentator stated, “Some of the most important resources and values in the area that need careful monitoring and protection are...the incredible scenic beauty of the alpine landscape (scenic resources are all too often inadequately protected, perhaps because their appreciation is somewhat subjective and they are not as easy to quantify as, for example, populations of fish and wildlife).” They said BLM should regard the scenic resources as important as other natural resources, and take action to maintain and enhance scenic qualities. Specific scenic quality concerns were primarily directed towards mineral exploration that occurs adjacent to the river corridor.

13. Subsistence

In general, the non-Native community wants continued access and opportunities for subsistence hunting, while the Native community has concerns over impacts to subsistence activities, mostly related to increased recreational and sport hunting and fishing activities. One comment suggested, “Some of the most important resources and values in the area that need careful monitoring and protection are fish and wildlife (both game and nongame) and their habitat (good examples are grayling and, of course, of special importance to subsistence hunters, sport hunters, and wildlife watchers, the Nelchina Caribou Herd)...” Another comment proposed limiting recreational use during subsistence hunting season and stated, “We are opposed to this area being open to recreational use during the hunting season. Recreational use should be off-limits within this area, so that qualified Federal subsistence uses may have priority within this area so that they can continue to hunt without being impacted by them.”

14. Travel Management

Travel Management is a comprehensive program that addresses all types of access and transportation needs: motorized, mechanized, animal-powered, or human-powered. Comments regarding Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) 17(b) easements and RS 2477 rights-of-way were included in this category.

Opinions varied widely on Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) management, with an almost equal division between those who would prefer no regulations or restrictions and almost unlimited motorized access, to those who recognize resource impacts and see the need for some restrictions on trails. There were some respondents who said the area was a primitive area and that there should be no OHV trails at all. Most see the need for some maintenance of trails, but balanced with the desire to not encourage or increase uses on the trails. Numerous comments emphasized that trail maintenance of existing trails was necessary, but that there was no need for future investments in new trails, unless future visitation trends show that new trails are needed to prevent resource degradation caused by unmanaged trail

proliferation. There were comments concerning the recognition of opportunities for increased education regarding trails (marking of trails, trailhead signs, etiquette signs, directional signs, interpretive work at trailheads, etc.), as well as the need to address conflicts between motorized and non-motorized trail users. One commenter said, “We don’t support the use of ATVs anywhere in the corridor. There are LOTS of other places to use them besides this congressionally designated unit. For us, and for many others, there is nothing “wild” about motorized recreational vehicles. There are very few things which more emphatically tame wild areas than motorized vehicles.” Another comment suggested that there were enough areas with OHV access in the Denali Highway area and that this area should be “retained as a non-mechanized area”. Another respondent said OHV use should be prohibited within the “Wild” segment of the river corridor.

On the other hand, some respondents stated there were no significant adverse impacts caused by OHV use within the corridor. Another said the area was too rugged for recreational OHV use and that they are not many people who use OHVs in the planning area. There was another comment suggesting that certain trails within the planning area had not been identified in the scoping bulletin, effectively limiting access to this user group.

Opinions also varied on motorized powerboat management. Numerous comments recommended that some restrictions be placed on the use of motor boats within the planning area. Two comments suggested that all motorized watercraft should be prohibited in the “Wild” section of the river corridor. Another comment suggested, “...consideration should be given to making all of the Tangle Lakes non-motorized. Another possibility is making the upper Tangles, and the lower Tangles except for Round Tangle, non-motorized; that would restrict the motorized use to the lake directly adjacent to the developed campground, on the busier, campground side of the highway (an exception could perhaps be made for the other lower Tangles during the September moose hunting season). Any motorized use that does occur on the Tangles should be limited to electric motors, or gas motors of no more than 5 horsepower (here also an exception could perhaps be made during the September moose hunting season if larger motors (up to 15 horsepower) are required for safety or other practical purposes).” Another comment suggested recreational powerboat use should be prohibited during the subsistence hunting seasons throughout the planning area. There were also comments stating the use of jet skis, airboats, or hovercraft should be prohibited within the entire river corridor, due to excessive noise and possible harm to vegetation and fish/wildlife habitat.

Comments that supported powerboat use throughout the river corridor were largely based on the general perception that powerboat use was already very low, and that powerboat use can peacefully exist alongside non-motorized boating, and that powerboats provide a “safety net” for those river users who may need assistance. It was suggested the river corridor was self-limiting due to river channel conditions and difficulty of navigation, and consequently receives less pressure than other areas. It was also stated that BLM did not have jurisdiction over navigable sections of the river corridor and powerboat use was a traditional activity within the planning area.

There were two comments regarding snowmachine use. One commenter suggested snowmachines are “heavy polluters”, and that water pollution could be minimized by

requiring snowmachines to avoid the river corridor and to cross the river corridor at right angles, and preferably on the highway. Another comment suggested snowmachine use was “fine during adequate snow cover.”

A few comments were received regarding ANCSA 17(b) easements. Section 17(b) of the ANCSA provided for the reservation of easements across lands being conveyed to Native regional and village corporations primarily to provide access to public lands. Comments on easements noted that all easements within the planning area should be identified with their name and easement number. One commenter also stated that all RS 2477 access routes should be identified within the planning area.

15. Vegetation

One comment expressed concern over damage done to vegetation and the vegetative mat by OHV use. It was recommended that education be provided regarding the impacts to soils and vegetation resulting from OHV use. Two comments also expressed concerns about damages related to lake and riverside vegetation and habitats caused by jet skis, airboats, and hovercrafts.

16. Water Quality

Few comments specifically mentioned water quality, although there was general agreement that the water quality of the area should be protected from impacts associated with OHV use. One comment stated minimizing noise impacts caused by motorized recreation and artificial noise sources would also help to protect clean air and water. Pollution concerns were also mentioned in relation to the use of personal watercraft, airboats, and hovercraft. It was recommended that the BLM consider phasing in a requirement mandating the use of 4-stroke gasoline motors to reduce water pollution. One comment expressed concerns related to the development of a mining road across the river corridor and potential effects to water quality. There was also a concern of pollution caused by snowmachine use. The commenter stated, “Many if not most snowmachines are heavy polluters. Water pollution in the corridor could perhaps be minimized by requiring snowmachines to avoid the corridor except to make right angle crossings, preferably on the highway.”

17. Wilderness Characteristics

One comment suggested that the planning process should identify protections and means to preserve wilderness quality characteristics defined as naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude, and outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The commenter stated, “...wilderness qualities should be documented with goals for protection to prevent degradation that would preclude future designations.” Another commenter said that motorized uses were not compatible with a primitive wilderness experience, and that they did not support the use of any mechanized equipment to gain access to remote backcountry locations.

B. Comments Specifically Related to Recreation Management Zones (RMZ)

Some of the comments that were received were specifically related to the Benefits Based Planning Process. Subsequent to the development of the EARMP, the BLM developed new recreation land use planning requirements for Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMA) that were not included in the EARMP. This new guidance, referred to as Benefits Based Planning, requires specific recreation-related land use allocations and the development of recreation management zones (RMZ) within each SRMA. RMZs are distinct areas within a SRMA that offer varied opportunities for recreational activities and experiences. Specific setting prescriptions and management actions are developed that seek to preserve the primary activities, experiences, and benefits that have been identified within each RMZ.

1. Tangle Lakes Zone 1

One commenter expressed that they would like to see Zones 1-3 remain as they are now. They stated the “...management plan in place over these years has allowed it to retain the degree of primitiveness I seek here.” Another commenter said Zone 1 would benefit from efforts to minimize the apparent abundance of campsites.

Another respondent said Zone 1 should be managed as a semi-primitive, non-motorized area, without any motorized OHV trails developed in the area. They stated that foot trails should be monitored and kept to a minimum to discourage additional use and to keep the environment in its natural state. They said snow machines were acceptable during periods of adequate snow cover and that motorized boating should be kept to a minimal level, especially during hunting season. They were opposed to the area being open to recreational use during the hunting season so that qualified Federal subsistence users would have a priority within the area. They also suggested that all applicable State and Federal laws regarding subsistence and cultural resources should be adhered to so that Zone 1 will be kept in its “natural pristine state and as a free flowing water body”, and to protect cultural resources from harm. They said the enforcement of rules and regulations are needed to keep this area free from trash and waste and to keep the area in its beautiful natural state, and that BLM should not market any lands within the planning area. They suggested that environmental education of land uses should be conducted by BLM; and the BLM should monitor this area at least 3 times per year, during the early spring, summer, and late fall months. They also suggested cooperative agreements should be developed with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

2. Tangle Lakes Zone 2

One commenter said Zone 2 was heavily used, and that it may be beneficial for many of the established fire rings and campsites to remain obvious to keep camping use concentrated in already impacted areas.

Another respondent said Zone 2 should be managed as a semi-primitive, motorized area, with motorized OHV trails only allowed on maintained trails, and kept to a minimal level to prevent rutting and erosion of the soil. They stated that foot trails should be monitored and kept to a minimum to discourage additional use and the BLM should discourage the development of more foot trails within the zone. They said snow machines were acceptable

during periods of adequate snow cover and that motorized boating should be kept to a minimal level, especially during hunting season. They suggested the development of facilities should be kept as is, and that there were already adequate structures in place, and that building more facilities will only encourage more tourist and public uses within the area. They were opposed to this area being open to recreational use during the hunting season so that qualified Federal subsistence users would have a priority within the area. They said all applicable State and Federal laws regarding subsistence and cultural resources should be adhered to so that Zone 2 will be kept in its “natural pristine state and as a free flowing water body”, and to protect cultural resources from harm. They said the enforcement of rules and regulations are needed to keep this area free from trash and waste and to keep the area in its beautiful natural state, and BLM should not market any lands within the planning area. They suggested that environmental education of land uses should be conducted by BLM; and the BLM should monitor this area at least 3 times per year, during the early spring, summer, and late fall months. They also suggested cooperative agreements should be developed with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

3. Tangle Lakes Developed Zone 3

One respondent said Zone 3 should be managed as a semi-primitive area, as much as possible. They also stated that trails should be kept to a minimal level, and foot trails should be monitored and kept to a minimum to discourage additional use and the BLM should discourage the development of more foot trails within the zone. They said snow machines were acceptable during periods of adequate snow cover and that motorized boating should be kept to a minimal level, especially during hunting season. They suggested the development of facilities should be kept as is, and that there were already adequate structures in place, and that building more facilities will only encourage more tourist and public uses within the area. They were opposed to this area being open to recreational use during the hunting season so that qualified Federal subsistence users would have a priority within the area. They said all applicable State and Federal laws regarding subsistence and cultural resources should be adhered to so that Zone 3 will be kept in its “natural pristine state and as a free flowing water body”, and to protect cultural resources from harm. They suggested the enforcement of rules and regulations are needed to keep this area free from trash and waste and to keep the area in its beautiful natural state, and BLM should not market any lands within the planning area. They recommended environmental education of land uses should be conducted by BLM; and the BLM should monitor this area at least 3 times per year, during the early spring, summer, and late fall months. They also suggested cooperative agreements should be developed with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

4. Delta River Zone 4

One commenter said there should be no restrictions on motorized boating within this zone. It was stated that this section of the river was “certainly navigable” and that motorized boating within this zone was a traditional use. The commenter also said the BLM should not regulate human waste disposal or camping within this zone. They suggested that education regarding the cutting of live trees might be helpful within the zone. Another commenter said Zone 4 was heavily used, and that it may be beneficial for many of the established fire rings and campsites to remain obvious to keep camping use concentrated in already impacted areas.

Another respondent said Zone 4 should be managed as a semi-primitive, non-motorized area. They said foot trails should be monitored and kept to a minimum to discourage additional use, and the BLM should discourage the development of more foot trails within the zone. They said snow machines were acceptable during periods of adequate snow cover and that motorized boating should be kept to a minimal level, especially during hunting season. They said no additional campsites should be developed within the zone because it will encourage additional use. They were also opposed to this area being open to recreational use during the hunting season so that qualified Federal subsistence users would have a priority within the area. They said all applicable State and Federal laws regarding subsistence and cultural resources should be adhered to so that Zone 4 will be kept in its “natural pristine state and as a free flowing water body”, and to protect cultural resources from harm. They suggested the enforcement of rules and regulations are needed to keep this area free from trash and waste and to keep the area in its beautiful natural state, and BLM should not market any lands within the planning area. They recommended environmental education of land uses should be conducted by BLM; and the BLM should monitor this area at least 3 times per year, during the early spring, summer, and late fall months. They also suggested cooperative agreements should be developed with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

5. Delta River Zone 5

One commenter was supportive of regulations limiting group size and the kinds of camping equipment allowed within this zone. They were “...recently dismayed to find a large hunting camp within Zone 5 with an enormous footprint and an excess of gear that had been powered in on a loud and fast moving inboard jet boat. This included a number of OHVs that were off of designated trails, enormous wall tents, and what looked like a television. The presence of this camp greatly diminished our passing group's ability to enjoy the targeted experiences for this zone.”

Another respondent said Zone 5 should be managed as a semi-primitive area, and that it should be “...kept as a non-motorized place as much as possible.” They also said foot trails should be monitored and kept to a minimum to discourage additional use and the BLM should discourage the development of more foot trails within the zone. They said snow machines were acceptable during periods of adequate snow cover and that motorized boating should be kept to a minimal level, especially during hunting season. They also said no additional campsites should be developed within the zone because it will encourage additional use. They were opposed to this area being open to recreational use during the hunting season so that qualified Federal subsistence users would have a priority within the area. They said all applicable State and Federal laws regarding subsistence and cultural resources should be adhered to so that Zone 5 will be kept in its “natural pristine state and as a free flowing water body”, and to protect cultural resources from harm. They suggested the enforcement of rules and regulations are needed to keep this area free from trash and waste and to keep the area in its beautiful natural state, and BLM should not market any lands within the planning area. They recommended environmental education of land uses should be conducted by BLM; and the BLM should monitor this area at least 3 times per year, during the early spring, summer late fall months. They also suggested cooperative

agreements should be developed with Ahtna, Inc. or village councils to gather an oral history of the area.

C. Comments on the Planning Process

Some of the comments that were received were related to the planning process itself. There were comments stating that the BLM had not followed the process stipulated by the National Environmental Policy Act in that it had not provided adequate opportunities for the public to participate in the scoping process. The commenter said the scoping period should have been accompanied by public meetings and that the scoping period should be extended an additional thirty days. They suggested that the BLM provide an electronic copy of the 1983 Delta River Management Plan on the BLM website, and that the scoping period was inadequate to ensure genuine participation opportunities for the general public. Another commenter said BLM had purposely "...divided the user groups into the "motor-heads" and the "non-motor heads" and have basically played them against each other rather than developing a plan to fit both of their desires and interests...Now, with the proposed changes it is obvious that the motivation behind the updated plan is not simply to update it for the management of the current and potential future use of the river, but to manage one whole user group out of the river valley all together." Overall, people were also very interested in how they were going to be informed about future opportunities to participate in the planning process.

The BLM will consider a range of alternatives in the development of the EA. All comments that are received will be considered without preferential treatment to a particular user group. A final proposed action is selected based upon environmental consequences that are anticipated and analyzed in each alternative. The BLM is only required to provide a minimum 30 day comment period on issues and planning criteria during the scoping phase (see H-1601-1). The BLM sent out more than 1100 letters to interested parties, 280 email announcements, advertised in two local newspapers, in radio announcements, on the BLM website, and on internet list serves. BLM planning guidelines state that public participation may occur through a variety of methods, including, but not limited to, public meetings. The scoping period was open for 60 days. Depending on the local situation and planning issues, the BLM may conduct a more involved scoping effort. There will be additional opportunities for public involvement during the preparation of the environmental assessment, and public meetings may be considered at a later time. Planning criteria were included in the Federal Register Notice of Intent and in the scoping bulletin which was referenced in the cover letter and available for review on the BLM website or available upon request from the BLM. The 1983 Delta NWSR plan has been added to the Delta planning website.

D. Issues Raised During Scoping That Are Outside the Scope of the EA

1. Climate Change

One comment requested the EA and LUP Amendment incorporate alternatives and a strategy for proactively addressing and responding to the effects of climate change and global warming throughout the entire EARMP planning area. The commenter said, "...the East

Alaska RMP, as well as other BLM and federal land management plans in Alaska, have failed to address climate change in a quantitative and comprehensive manner...” They also requested that BLM incorporate the following point of discussion in the EA: “Provide training on climate change and variability for all resource managers; consider climate change and variability as a component of long-range management plans and strategies, as well as prioritizing adaptive management; implement monitoring and assessment programs for impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitats; educate the public about climate change and its effects on Alaska; establish and maintain migration corridors that allow species movement and vegetation shifts among islands of suitable habitat; increase buffer zones around identified critical habitat in order to increase options for species under various climate change scenarios; protect riparian and wetland communities to promote resilience of these important and susceptible habitats; and make the reduction and elimination of human-induced synergistic impacts a top priority for land and resource management.”

The issue of climate change was recognized and previously addressed in the EARMP in Chapter IV, page 587. The EARMP says, “Although no formal studies on the effects of climate change have been completed for the planning area, it can be assumed that similar changes and impacts of global climate change could be observed and will continue to alter the sub-arctic ecosystems and landscape characteristics. In particular, BLM will need to be sensitive to changes in vegetation and how those changes affect habitat. BLM will also need to be aware of and adjust to changing permafrost and soils conditions. These will be site-specific considerations that will need to be considered in trails management, pipeline construction, or any ground-disturbing activity. Because climate change must be viewed from a global perspective, the magnitude of emissions potentially contributed by any proposed activities in the Planning Area needs to be viewed in that context. Activities associated with oil and gas or mineral exploration and development, recreation, prescribed burning, or forestry would produce some of the greenhouse gases. The incremental contribution of greenhouse gases from the proposed alternatives in the Planning Area would be minor when compared to total greenhouse gas contributions.”

Given this guidance, climate change will be analyzed in this EA only to the extent that it is affected by site-specific, recreation-related decisions that are developed in the plan. Proposed recreation decisions and possible effects that may result in climate change will be viewed in a global perspective, as directed in the EARMP. Considerations of effects from other uses and activities that may or may not result in climate change are outside the scope of this planning effort.

2. Minerals and Minerals Access

During scoping, BLM received numerous comments related to the management of mineral resources and access to mineral resources. One commenter was concerned that the noise, infrastructure, and visual impacts associated with the potential development of a large scale industrial mine on lands adjacent to the planning area was incompatible and would detract from the type of experience provided by a Wild and Scenic River. Another commenter said it would not be responsible for the BLM to take a hands-off approach to mining activities located adjacent to the river corridor, and that such mineral exploration and development poses a very significant threat to recreationists who use the river corridor. Another

commenter favored retaining and expanding withdrawals and avoidance areas to protect river resources.

Minerals management within the planning area was previously analyzed and decisions were made regarding mineral entry, leasing, sales, and avoidance areas in the EARMP. As defined in the EARMP, BLM managed lands located within the planning area are closed to mineral leasing, entry and sale, except for the portion of the river corridor classified as “recreational”, which has been designated as an avoidance area. The EARMP also stated that Right of Way (ROW) may be authorized within the Delta WSR corridor and SRMA, but only with special measures to protect resources and ORVs. Alternatives in the EA will include specific criteria consistent with Title XI of ANILCA, 43 CFR 36, and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act so that applications for future right-of-ways within the corridor may be reviewed relative to maintenance or enhancement of resource values. Additional decisions related to mineral resources are outside the scope of this planning effort.

3. RS2477 Rights-of-Way

One commenter raised the issue of managing RS 2477 routes to provide access to public lands. The issue of determining the validity of RS 2477 rights-of-way is outside the scope of the EA. Land use planning does not affect valid RS 2477 rights or future assertions. In the absence of specific regulation or law, the validity of all RS 2477 rights-of-way is determined on a case-by-case basis, either through the federal courts or by legally binding agreement of all landowners. The EA will include language indicating that the validity of RS 2477 rights-of-way will be determined outside of the planning process.

4. Wilderness Designation

One comment said, “We understand that current management prescribes that no wilderness designations or inventories can be made – but we consider this an ever changing administrative priority as we have seen a record of closing and opening for wilderness review and designation, in Alaska. In light of this, wilderness qualities should be documented with goals for protection to prevent degradation that would preclude future designations.”

The issue of wilderness characteristics was recognized and previously addressed in the EARMP in Chapter I, page 17. The EARMP says, “There are no BLM-managed wilderness areas or wilderness study areas within the planning area. There are areas that possess opportunities for a primitive recreation experience, solitude, and naturalness. These will not be designated or managed as Wilderness areas. In many cases, they will be managed to maintain the current primitive recreation experience. A description of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum inventory, including primitive opportunities, is discussed in Chapter III in the *Recreation* section. Management prescriptions for recreation are described in Chapter II, and impacts to primitive recreation experiences are described in Chapter IV.”

Given this guidance, wilderness qualities and characteristics will not be documented for the purposes of future wilderness designation, but will be analyzed in the EA only to the extent that these characteristics are affected by site-specific, recreation-related decisions that are developed in the plan. Considerations of effects from other uses and activities that may or

may not result in changes to wilderness characteristics are outside the scope of this planning effort.

E. Studies and Technical Data Requested

A comment requested the BLM provide acreages, designations, and decisions in a table format with subsequent explanation and rationale for decisions. The EA will address this request by providing these figures in the EA. The commenter also requested "...BLM...incorporate the best available science, using the best available methods, in addressing climate change impacts on the ecosystems and inhabitants of the East Alaska planning area, as required by law. If there is not sufficient expertise within BLM to achieve this, we encourage BLM to seek outside assistance in order to prepare a reasonable, comprehensive assessment of climate change that will serve the purpose of conservation and sustainable management of the resources entrusted to BLM in this area." As discussed previously, the assessment of impacts related to climate change will be analyzed in this EA only to the extent that it is affected by recreation-related decisions that are developed in the plan. The same respondent also requested that the BLM conduct a detailed analysis to identify wilderness characteristics in the planning area. The EA will consider wilderness characteristics and effects to wilderness characteristics resulting from recreation-related decisions within the planning area.

One comment suggested BLM inventory and evaluate impacts from OHV use within the planning area. They specifically requested that the BLM inventory existing and designated trails and their condition to identify the level of degradation and prioritize stabilization activities, if needed. These efforts are already occurring on OHV trails within the planning area, and the data collected from these efforts will be incorporated into this planning process.

A comment related to the issue of access suggested that roads, trails and historic access routes should be shown on all maps and identified with their BLM and/or State of Alaska identification numbers. The comment also requested the plan include and integrate the State of Alaska land selections that were established for access roads, everywhere they exist in the planning area." The BLM will display all known roads, trails, and access routes that exist within the planning area. There are no ANCSA 17(b) access routes nor qualified RS-2477 ROW currently identified within the planning area. As discussed previously, the validity and existence of newly identified RS-2477 routes is determined outside of the planning process, and land use planning does not affect valid RS-2477 rights or future assertions. The planning effort will integrate State of Alaska land selections within the planning area where applicable.

One comment made a general suggestion that the BLM prepare a natural soundscape plan. "Natural quiet and natural sounds should be recognized by all public land managers as critical resources in and of themselves that deserve no less consideration than clean air and water, or fish and wildlife and their habitat. Soundscape plans should be prepared. The analysis of proposed agency actions should include a determination of the possible effects on natural quiet and natural sounds and on the humans and wildlife that enjoy or depend on them." The BLM will address potential effects to "natural quiet and natural sounds" in the

EA as they relate to recreational activities, but a soundscape plan for the entire planning area will not be undertaken.

III. SUMMARY OF FUTURE STEPS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

Following is a list of future steps in this planning process where there will be opportunities for public participation, comment, or review.

The Delta Planning website will be updated regularly about the Delta River planning process and will identify opportunities for participation. Written comments may be mailed to the Glennallen Field Office. Although comments may be accepted at any time, comments that are received during formal review periods will be utilized in preparing final documents.

Mailing Address: Bureau of Land Management, Attn: Delta River Planning, P.O. Box 147, Glennallen, Alaska, 99588.

Telephone Contact: Heath Emmons, River Manager, at (907)822-3217.

Website: http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/sa/delta_nwsr/Delta_River_Planning.html

A. Scoping

This is the stage that has just been completed. It included a 60-day public comment period, the results of which are summarized in this report.

B. Management Alternative Development

Based on the feedback we received from public scoping, management alternatives will be developed that address the purpose and need for the plan. Alternatives will address issues that have been identified. Then, the effects for each of the alternatives will be analyzed.

C. Preliminary EA

The alternatives will be analyzed and the environmental effects from each alternative will be discussed in a preliminary EA and draft Delta River Management Plan. There will be a minimum comment period of 30 days once the preliminary EA and draft Delta River Management Plan is available. This is tentatively scheduled for the summer of 2009.

D. Finalizing the Decision

Based on comments received, changes will be made to the preliminary EA and a proposed Delta River Management Plan and associated EA will be available for review. If there are no significant impacts, a Finding of No Significant Impact will be prepared. At this time, a 30-day protest period and a 60-day Governor's consistency review will be provided. At the conclusion of the protest period and Governor's consistency review, the Decision Record will be signed. The Decision Record is tentatively scheduled for the spring of 2010.

IV. REFERENCES

40 CFR 1500 et seq. Council on Environmental Quality, Regulations for Implementing NEPA.

43 CFR 1610. BLM Planning Regulations.

42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq. National Environmental Policy Act.

43 U.S.C. 1701 et seq. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

Alaska Department of Transportation, Let's Get Moving 2030: Alaska's Statewide Long Range Transportation Policy Plan, February, 2008.

Alaska National Lands Interest Conservation Act. U.S. Public Law 96-487. December 2, 1980.

Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. U.S. Public Law 92-203. December 18, 1971.

BLM. Delta National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan. BLM, Glennallen Field Office, Alaska. October 7, 1983.

BLM. Draft Public Scoping Report, Eastern Interior Management Plans. BLM, Fairbanks District Office, Alaska. September, 2008.

BLM. East Alaska Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision, Approved Plan. BLM, Glennallen Field Office, Alaska. September 7, 2007.

BLM. East Alaska Proposed Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement. BLM, Glennallen Field Office, Alaska. June 2006.

BLM. Gulkana National Wild River Management Plan. BLM, Glennallen Field Office, Alaska. July 21, 2006.

BLM. Land Use Planning Handbook. Handbook H-1601-1.

Federal Register. Notice of Intent To Prepare an Amendment to the East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP) for the Delta River Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). Vol. 73, No. 70, Page 19527, April 10, 2008.

NPS. Scoping Report, Nabesna ORV Trail Environmental Impact Statement. Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve, National Park Service, Alaska. July 2008.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Public Law 90-542.